

Ancient Native American Occupation Periods

Note: The Archaic and Woodland eras are further broken into early, middle, and late stages.

Paleoindian

The Paleoindian period was from 10,000 to 8000 BCE. During that time, humans reached the east coast of the US (around 12,000 years ago). They lived in an ice age, where glaciers covered large parts of North America and the environment was tundra-like. Large mammals roamed the continent, and there were forests of evergreen trees. The population size was small, and people hunted and gathered their food. Not many artifacts are often found from this era because there were so few people that were constantly moving from one place to another. The Trent House has no artifacts from this time.

Archaic

The next period was the Early Archaic period, which was from about 8000 to 6000 BCE. The Pleistocene ice retreated around 8000 BCE, and the climate got warmer. People continued to hunt and gather their food, but had more options, as woodlands and wetlands emerged.

Archaeological evidence shows that people either lived by the coast, or by rivers. There is little evidence to indicate that people fished at this time, however. Population levels were still low, so finding sites from this time is a rare occurrence. Projectile points found from this era show great diversity when found.

The Middle Archaic period was from 6000 to 3000 BCE. The environment began to reach modern conditions during that time. The first evidence for fishing dates to this era. Population levels began to rise slightly as more resources became available.

The Late Archaic period was from 3000 to 1000 BCE. Populations grew larger during this time, and many more archaeological sites have been found from this period. People began to settle in larger groups by rivers, and fishing tools and associated objects are very common from this era. A great variety of projectile points date to this period, some of which are on display at the Trent House visitor center.

Woodland

The Early Woodland period began around 1000 BCE and ended around 0 CE. The first evidence of pottery is found around 1000 BCE. All pottery was made by hand and baked in fires. There were more permanent, seasonally occupied settlements during this period, and even more fishing than before.

The Middle Woodland period was from 0 to 900 CE. Fishing intensified during this period. Native Americans used spears for fishing, but around 500 CE the bow and arrow began to be used for hunting. Lastly, new types of ceramics were developed during this time. Artifacts from this period are on display at the Visitor Center.

The final period of Native American occupation before contact with Europeans was the Late Woodland period (900 to 1600 CE). The period was characterized by rising populations and technological diversity. People also began to become sedentary, or lived in one place year-round. Agriculture became a practice around 900 CE. Maize has been found at the Old Barracks site that dates to 940 CE. Tools associated with agriculture are found from this time.

The people who lived in the Late Woodland are now known to us as the Lenape. Europeans traded with the Lenape people extensively, so artifacts from 1600 and beyond are a mixture of Native American and European items. The Trent House museum has Woodland and Contact period artifacts on display.

Contact Period

Europeans first reached what is now New Jersey in 1600 CE. The colonists took pieces of land, settled, and began their lives. The Lenape people traded with the Europeans, but also died from diseases that spread between the two groups. Our understanding of the Lenape of the contact period comes from European writings of the time that described the Lenape people and lifestyle.